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THE UNITED STATES AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The following is based on an address by Alfred L. Atherton, Jr., Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, to the Annual Convention of B'nai Brith District Six, Omaha, Nebraska.

All of us here tonight would agree that the security and survival of Israel must be a non-negotiable premise of American Middle East policy. No significant body of opinion in this country would disagree with that premise.

Our national commitment to Israel's security and survival is not at issue. The issue, precisely stated, is to define and pursue a national policy that puts us in the strongest possible position to continue to meet that commitment. A responsible Middle East policy for America must assure that we retain the capacity to influence the course of events in the Middle East commensurate with our bilateral and global responsibilities as a major power. The United States, with the good will which it uniquely has among all the parties in the Middle East, is in a position to help shape events, to help prevent wars, and to help the parties to find their way along the hard road to a negotiated peace. To continue to play this role we must pursue policies which take into account the broad range of American concerns and interests in the Middle East.

Major U.S. Interests

It is therefore important, as a starting point, to identify what those concerns and interests are.

- Our strong commitment to the security and survival of Israel is a commitment rooted deeply in history. It has been reaffirmed by every Administration in this country since the modern State of Israel came into existence almost 30 years ago. As recently as last May 13, President Ford told the annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee in Washington:

"A strong Israel is essential to a stable peace in the Middle East. Our commitment to Israel will meet the test of American steadfastness and resolve. My Administration will not be found wanting. The United States will continue to help Israel provide for her security."

A concrete manifestation of President Ford's policy toward Israel can be seen in the fact that for the fiscal years 1976 and 1977 he has requested over \$4 billion in economic and military assistance, compared to a total of only \$6 billion in U.S. assistance to Israel during the previous 20 years of Israel's existence.

- We also have good and mutually beneficial relations with most of the nations of the Arab world. This is important to them. They seek American technology and managerial know-how for their development programs. Moderate Arab leaders also look to military assistance from the United States as a buttress to their moderation and as a means of protecting themselves against more

radical forces in the area. Good relations with the Arab world are also important to us. They are important economically, for example, in jobs created in this country by the growing volume of exports to, and investment in, Arab countries. They are important in helping to meet our energy requirements for the years ahead. They are also important politically, in a world where the interdependence of developed and developing nations is a condition for the well-being of all. Our relations with the Arab world, wisely nurtured, can enhance our ability to strengthen the forces of moderation in the Middle East and advance the cause of peace. A return to the estrangement that so long marred our relations with many Arab nations would, in today's interdependent world, have negative effects on our interests extending far beyond the Middle East.

- A third interest of the United States is the preservation and strengthening of our alliances. Each crisis in the Middle East places severe strains on the fabric of those alliances.

- Finally, we have an interest, dictated by our global responsibilities in this nuclear age, to prevent conflict in the Middle East from again becoming a flashpoint of superpower confrontation.

We cannot pursue our interests in the Middle East selectively. Yet so long as the Arab-Israeli conflict persists, there are potential contradictions among them. Simple logic therefore requires us—indeed, impels us—to persevere in the search for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In no other way can we guard against an evolution of events that could bring our multiple interests and concerns into conflict, benefiting only those, both within and outside the region, who seek to inflame, or polarize, or exploit the conflict. An Arab-Israeli peace settlement which had the strong backing of the United States and of the world community generally would constitute in the long run the best guarantee of Israel's security and survival.

Peace Through Negotiation

The question we must therefore ask ourselves is whether or not conditions exist which make a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict attainable. What are the fundamental issues which must be dealt with if there is to be tangible progress toward peace? Briefly stated, the issues are these:

- Israel seeks from the Arabs recognition of its legitimacy and right to exist, with all this implies; an end to belligerency, an end to threats of force, and commitments to live together in peace and security.

- The Arab States seek the restoration of occupied territories and, in their words, justice for the Palestinian people.

The suspicions between Arabs and Israelis are so deep, the absence of meaningful communication between them so absolute, that each tends to put the worst interpretation on the stated objectives of the other. When Israel says it seeks security, the Arabs take this to mean that Israel seeks to retain major parts, if not all, of the territories occupied in the 1967 war. When the Arabs speak of the national rights of the Palestinians, Israelis hear a call for the destruction of Israel as a Jewish State. Undoubtedly some on both sides do harbor such extreme feelings. But there are also those who do not. Public opinion is not monolithic in either Israel or the Arab world; it is in flux, and there is a great yearning on both sides for an end to the killing and conflict. The present generation of Arab and Israeli leaders have an opportunity to lead their peoples to a genuine peace between them—an opportunity that has not existed before, and that may not come again soon if the present opportunity is missed.

Support for a peaceful settlement can only be consolidated, the true intentions of both sides can only be tested, in the give-and-take of a process of negotiations between the parties that holds out hope for peace. The precise form of negotiations—whether face-to-face, indirect through a third party, or some combination of the two—is less important than the dynamics of the process itself. To generate such a process has been the central purpose of American diplomacy for years, and in particular throughout the active and creative period since the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973. Through all the drama of shuttle diplomacy, the Geneva Conference, and debates in the United Nations, our efforts have been directed toward this objective: to engage Arabs and Israelis in a process of negotiations that they themselves will come to recognize as in their own best interests.

Because there is so far yet to go, it is easy to forget how much has already been achieved. Be-

tween 1949 and 1974, there were no Arab-Israeli negotiations on the fundamental issues and no agreements to which they were direct parties. In two short years, 1974 and 1975, there were four negotiations and three agreements—two between Egypt and Israel, one between Syria and Israel. Measured against the absolutes of final peace, the territorial and political distance covered by these agreements is modest. In psychological terms, it represents a quantum leap forward. For the first time in a quarter of a century, the rigid mindsets and sterile rhetoric that for so many years made progress toward peace impossible have given way to the beginnings of a new pragmatism and a new vision of what the Middle East could be.

Like all changes that touch the deepest emotions, fears, and hopes of nations, that demand a break with past patterns of thought and behavior and a step into the unknowable future, these fragile beginnings have created new tensions and awakened old traumas. The internal debate in Israel, the dissensions within the Arab world, the travail of Lebanon have in the first instance their own internal causes. But it is equally clear that these developments, which prolong and increase the ferment in the Middle East, are infinitely more intense and less amenable to solution precisely because they are caught in the crosscurrents of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The resumption of negotiations looking toward a solution of that conflict must remain a high priority on the agenda of unfinished business in the foreign relations of the United States. We cannot change the imperatives of history. If our Government does not retain the initiative in dealing with these issues, we will be forced to respond to the initiatives of others, and to events themselves. The same is true of our friends in the Middle East, who are much more directly concerned.

They recognize, as we do, that time is needed to prepare for the difficult decisions which lie ahead. We are not today at the moment of decision between war and peace.

But neither can that moment be postponed indefinitely. Sometime in the months and years ahead the Middle East will come to the crossroad where all concerned—both within and outside the region—must make the hard decision whether they will this time take the road toward peace or the road toward yet another Arab-Israeli war. That

decision will confront all concerned with difficult and agonizing choices, as they come to grips with the basic issues among them—the issue of how to live together for the first time in peace after so many decades of belligerency and war, the issue of territorial withdrawals and final borders, and the issue of the future of the Palestinian people.

All these questions are the proper subject for negotiations. It would be tragic if the world community despaired of the hope that Arabs and Israelis could find the answers to their own destiny and concluded that peace should be imposed on the nations of that troubled region. This is not our way. We prefer to work instead for a peace through negotiations among the parties themselves—with whatever assistance we and others can provide, in whatever forums prove the most practical and acceptable.

But in the absence of a negotiating process, and of the compromises that will be necessary to make such a process possible, pressures will grow to seek an alternative way. If there is anything the history of this conflict should have taught, it is that the Middle East will not stand still. It has experienced four wars in 25 years. The intervals between wars have grown shorter and have been marked by sporadic tension and violence, including acts of terrorism which feed on the unresolved hatred and frustration of the basic conflict. The cost of each successive war, in blood and money, has increased appallingly, and each war has had increasingly dangerous global economic and political repercussions. It is unthinkable that there should be a fifth Arab-Israeli war—and yet that is the grim alternative to negotiation, compromise, and further progress toward peace.

The risks of moving toward peace are great for the leaders on both sides; witness, for example, the storm of criticism unleashed against Egypt for President Sadat's statesmanlike decision, in concluding the most recent Sinai agreement, to commit Egypt to seek a final settlement through peaceful and not military means. For Israel, the risks it perceives are agonizing. Israelis feel they are being asked to exchange something tangible—territory occupied in 1967—for something intangible: commitments by their neighbors to recognize Israel's right to exist and to live in peace. Seen through Arab eyes, however, these commitments are also tangible, representing as they do an aban-

donment of the claim to recover all of former Palestine—a claim which was the unanimous Arab position for many years.

Middle East Balance Sheet

Whatever the risks of moving toward peace, the risks in not doing so are infinitely greater. I do not need to dwell on the costs and risks, should there be another war. But consider the costs even in the absence of war, not least of all the risk that prolonged stalemate will set in motion forces which will undermine moderate leaders in the region, seek to isolate the United States and Israel in the world, and erode our ability to influence the course of events.

If there were no alternative to this scenario of despair, the prospects for the Middle East and for the world would be grim indeed. I believe, however, that an alternative does exist. Let us look at the balance sheet.

On the one hand, the factors which make progress difficult are clear:

- The Lebanese crisis, which is in a sense an Arab crisis, makes more difficult the achievement of agreement by the Arab Governments on how to move toward a settlement with Israel;

- Second, the leadership of the Palestinian movement has not accepted the framework for peace hammered out in U.N. debates and embodied in Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 following the 1967 and 1973 wars. That framework calls for withdrawal from occupied territory and clear recognition of Israel's right to exist in the context of a peace settlement. While the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people must be taken into account in a final settlement, it is not reasonable to ask Israel to negotiate with them so long as they do not agree that part of a final settlement must be an agreement to live in peace with a sovereign, Jewish State of Israel.

- A third factor is the continuing debate in Israel about peace goals—for example, how to deal with the Palestinian issue, and what should be given up in return for peace. Meanwhile, policies such as the continued establishment of settlements in occupied territories raise questions in Arab minds about Israel's ultimate intentions.

- Similarly, voices of extremism in the Arab world and anti-Israeli actions in international forums—usually supported for opportunistic reasons by many governments not directly involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict—raise questions in Israeli minds about ultimate Arab intentions.

Let us look now at the plus side of the ledger:

- An internationally-sanctioned framework for a negotiated peace exists in Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Israel, the principal Arab Governments concerned, and the overwhelming majority of the world community—including the United States and the Soviet Union—are formally committed to and have accepted that framework. This framework was explicitly reaffirmed in the agreements between Israel, Egypt, and Syria.

- Second, while active negotiations are not presently going on, we have been exploring with the Arab Governments concerned, and are prepared to continue to do so, an Israeli proposal for negotiations based on the concept of a termination of the state of war and further territorial withdrawals on one or more fronts. In our view, this would offer a practical way—though not necessarily the only way—of continuing the negotiating process.

- Third, for the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and despite continued outbursts of shrill rhetoric from some quarters, there is today in much of the Arab world a moderate leadership which has accepted the principle of making peace with Israel and no longer espouses the goal of Arab sovereignty over all of what was Palestine.

- Fourth, the Soviet Union no longer has the same position of major influence it once enjoyed in certain Arab countries. Arab leaders perceive increasingly that while Soviet support may help them make war, only the United States, of the major powers, can produce progress toward peace, and the Soviet Union is well aware of the risks to it of continuing conflict, including setbacks to U.S.-Soviet relations.

- Fifth, there has been a constructive evolution in public understanding in this country of the complexities of the Middle East conflict, of its shades of grey as well as its blacks and whites, and of the

importance of continued progress toward peace. This strengthens the ability of your Government to speak with authority in its peacemaking efforts.

- Finally, the United States today enjoys the kind of relationship with both sides to the conflict which permits us to play a unique and positive role to the benefit of all who seek a reasonable, just, and lasting peace settlement.

Continuing Challenge

If all the parties concerned act with the vision that distinguishes true statesmanship, I believe these factors on the plus side of the ledger can prevail. This will require difficult decisions by Arab and Israeli leaders; it will require putting aside dreams of absolute objectives for the sake of achieving realistic compromises; it will require each side to understand the fears and legitimate national aspirations of the other; it will require a determined and prolonged test of intentions in the crucible of negotiations; and it will require that the United States persist in its efforts to keep the peace process alive, to avoid stagnation, to help the parties find solutions which are in their best interests—and ours. The United States will work with Israel throughout this process. I want to read you a brief quotation:

“I note with satisfaction that during the past two years, relations between the United States and Israel have become closer.

“Our governments have arrived at a common approach regarding the desirable political direction on the road to peace and in the development of the processes of peace... There has been no erosion in the position and attitude vis-a-vis Israel of the Administration, the Congress, or the American public.

“Relations between the United States and Israel remain firm.”

This was a statement by Prime Minister Rabin in the Knesset on June 15, two weeks ago.

Yet the challenge remains, with all its dangers and opportunities. The issues are clear, and they will neither change nor disappear. The imperatives for the nations of the Middle East, and for the interests of the United States, will be the same tomorrow as they are today. Our responsibilities to Israel, to ourselves, and to world peace and stability therefore leave us no realistic alternative but to continue on course, sustained by the hope that some day our children will look back on this period of history as the time when the Middle East—after a quarter century of strife—chose the road to peace.



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